lovesong

part ii

a green creek short story

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(Spoilers for Wolfsong, Ravensong and Heartsong. You've been warned.)

The first full moon after Carter leaves is like knives in her skin. It pulls at her, causing her skin to vibrate. She ignores it—there's too much work to do, the country is so vast, and Carter could be anywhere—until she can't. And then she tries to fight against it, tries to force her humanity to the forefront, the wolf snarling in her bones, a beast struggling to break free.

When she was on the cusp of her first shift, her mother—a sweet woman with fire in her eyes—held her close, wiping the sweat from her brow as she whispered, "I've got you, I've got you, you're fine, you're okay, I'm here." The pack circled around them, watching, waiting, low *whuffs* coming from the Alpha, his eyes red, red, red. Elizabeth Morris screamed and screamed as her nerves lit up, as her muscles stretched, as the bones cracked and broke, cracked and broke, hair sprouting along her arms and legs. A terrible shudder rolled through her, her back arching as her mouth dropped open, fangs sprouting from her gums.

And then relief, relief so green,

When she looked back up at her mother, it was with wolf eyes, sharper, the clarity enough to knock the breath from her chest. She no longer thought with a human mind. She was *wolf*, on four legs, her tail trembling.

Her mother smiled. "There you are. I knew you could do it. I'm so proud of you."

She hasn't thought about that moment in years. Too much has happened, and it never seems to end.

Her husband. Her children. Her pack, all of them never knowing a moment of peace, never getting a chance to breathe, to just *be*. It's fighting and death

and blood spilled upon the territory as if it demands a sacrifice time and time again.

She doesn't want to give into the shift when she's feeling so black because the last time she did—

after Thomas, his body still warm by the time she found him on that horrible night—she stayed as a wolf for months. It was easier to stay as a wolf because the grief, that all-consuming monster that never seemed to let her go, was…well. It wasn't gone, no, never that, but it was *manageable*, it was

easier, and for once, she wanted to go the easy route.

She hated herself for this, after. She hated that she wasn't there for her pack knowing they needed her, but then Joe and Kelly and Carter followed the monster into the dark, and she had never felt so alone in her life. She had Mark. She had Ox. And later, Jessie and Rico and Chris and Tanner, but oh god, it wasn't the same. It wasn't who she wanted, and she hated herself for feeling that way.

The boys—her lovely, stupid, wonderful boys—had done what they had to, done what they thought was right, and she had trusted Gordo to watch over them. She didn't regret this; Gordo, for all the rage he felt against the wolves, would never let anything happen to them. He was more than even he knew, but had she told him this? No, she hadn't. She'd threatened him. She'd told him she'd kill him if anything happened to her children. And worst of all, she'd *meant* it.

And here she was now, years later, her oldest son following a man he'd only known as a wolf for so long. Is this her fault? She thinks it might be, at least in part. She took joy where she could get it, watching Carter and his shadow, knowing what it meant but hoping against hope that he would have time to figure it out for himself. Time was a luxury they couldn't afford, but she saw the way Carter softened around the timber wolf when he thought no one was looking, this strange expression of wonder crossing his face, and she *knew* he was almost there, knew he was about to figure it out.

For all that Carter was—loyal, protective and oh so brave—he didn't always see what was right in front of him. Elizabeth could've told him, but she wanted him to see it for himself, knowing that

moment when it hit him would be like the sun peeking through the clouds after a never-ending storm.

She wonders, as she sometimes does, what it would've been like had Carter not been a Bennett, had the feral wolf not been Gavin Livingstone. Just two men without the heavy weight of their names hanging above them. What would they have been like together? Would they have seen each other for what they were? Or even *if* they'd still been who they are but without the heartache, what could it have been like?

She doesn't know, and this haunts her.

But in her head, in this quiet space where she's alone, away from the bonds of the pack that tug at her mind, she thinks they would've still found each other, still been drawn together. Perhaps Gavin would've rolled into Green Creek. Perhaps he would've stumbled into the shop, drawn by the sounds of that awful music Chris and Tanner insist on blaring, Rico snarking at the both of them as he was wont to do. What would he have been like? Elizabeth is desperate to know this. Would he be like his brother? She hopes so. For all that Gordo has been through, for all the anger festering in his heart, he's a man unlike any other.

And, perhaps, Gavin would have seen that. He'd have questions, of course, so many questions, but he'd get the answers he needed, and the boys would close up the shop early, heading home to the house at the end of the lane. Chris and Tanner and Robbie jostling each other as they climbed out of the truck, Ox smiling in that way he does, watching, always watching. Rico would be loud, telling anyone who would listen they found *another* goddamn wolf, what the hell is *with* you furry bastards, Bambi laughing at him. Gavin and Gordo would bring up the rear, Gordo unsure of himself and this man, but still wanting to bring him to the pack.

Carter would hear them coming home, and he'd stop mid-conversation, Joe and Kelly asking him what was wrong. Something would cross his face, a

look of confusion mixed with wonder. He'd stand from the kitchen table, chair scraping along the floor, ignoring his brothers demanding to know what that *feeling* was, another puzzle piece they didn't know they were missing locking into place.

She'd follow her eldest to the door, the others trailing after them, watching as Carter's breath hitched at the sight of the man next to Gordo, the man with the scowl on his face that so reminded her of how Gordo used to be.

Carter would undoubtedly make a bit of a fool of himself, but that what's so precious about him, isn't it? He's brash, headstrong, and when faced with this strange man, he'd puff out his chest, acting aloof though his mind raced with things he'd never thought of before.

Maybe nothing would've happened.

Or maybe it would've been everything.

But it doesn't matter now because that's not what took place. This funny little dream where nothing hurt isn't their reality. They are Bennetts. They have blood on their hands, and once again, they're fighting for their lives.

And Carter—lovely, ridiculous Carter—did what he thought was right.

She doesn't hate him for it. She can't. She won't. Though she wishes he'd gone about it any other way, she'd can't blame him. He is his father's son, for better or worse. When she looks at him, she sees Thomas Bennett more than she ever sees in Joe and Kelly. Though all three look like her, it's Carter who's most like his father, Carter who tries to shield his brothers from the darkness of the world. If only she'd told him what Gavin is to him. If only she hadn't let it play out as it had.

Maybe things would be different.

It's these thoughts she can't escape, the *what if*, and it burns within her like she's smoldering.

So she fights her shift, a penance for her inaction. She knows if she gives in to the wolf, there's a chance she won't know human thoughts again for a

long time to come. She can't have that. Her family is counting on her, they need her, and she won't fail them again.

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The morning of the first full moon after Carter leaves, Ox finds her in the forest, walking through the trees. She's thinking about going to the clearing, but she can't quite force herself to go there, at least not yet. It hurts too much, even if Thomas is there waiting for her like he'd been once upon a dream.

He startles her out of her thoughts when he says, "I know what you're doing."

She pauses, not turning around to look at him, fingers trailing along the bark of a tree. She's barefoot, the snow crunching under her feet, the thin crust cracking with every step she takes. She's cold, but it's what she wants. It makes her numb.

"Do you?" she replies, trying to keep her voice even.

"Yes," Ox says, the boy whose father told him he'd get shit all his life. If only that man could see him now. He'd fall to his knees in veneration, and if he didn't, Elizabeth would make him.

"What am I doing?" she asks.

He doesn't answer her. Instead, he steps around the tree, standing in front of her, though he keeps his distance. She marvels at him, this strange and wonderful man, not quite believing that one such as him could exist. *Maggie*, she thinks with all that she has. *You did good*. *You did so good*.

But she doesn't give voice to this thought, as much as she should. Instead, she says, "We used you."

Ox barely blinks. Werewolf Jesus. That's what Carter calls him. Werewolf Jesus with his Zen Alpha bullshit. It hurts, this, because she can hear Carter's voice clear as day as if he's standing right next to them.

“We used you,” she says again, but that’s not quite right. “*I* used you.”

Strangely, he smiles at her. It makes her want to bare her neck to him as a sign of respect. She doesn’t, but it’s close. He’s unlike anyone she’s ever known. Alpha, even when he wasn’t a wolf.

“Did you,” he says, and it’s not a question.

She answers it as if it is. “Yes,” she says, never looking away from him. “Joe, he…he didn’t speak.

Not until you. Not after what that…man did to him. But then you came into the world, and it was as if all that lost time just bubbled out of him, all the words he’d kept locked away.”

He chuckles quietly, and it hurts her. It hurts her to hear him take it so easily, as if it’s nothing, as if she’s any better than Richard Collins. Elijah. Robert Livingstone. It angers her, and she can’t stop the flood that follows. “I used you. I used you because the thought of losing Joe again was too much for me to take. I knew what it meant when he wanted to give you his stone wolf. I knew what it meant when Gordo brought you to the clearing for his first shift. I knew of tethers and mates and wolves and suffering and yet I did nothing to stop it. I encouraged it. I wanted it more than anything. I didn’t care what it would do to you. I loved you, even then, but I loved Joe more.”

He nods, leaning against the tree. He folds his arms and says nothing.

She looks away. The guilt is gnawing at her chest. There’s nothing she can do to stop it. “Ox, I—”

“You used me,” he says, and she flinches. “You and Thomas. You and Mark. You and Carter and Kelly and Joe.”

She shakes her head. “No, not….not them. Not my sons. They didn’t know. Not like we did. Not everything.”

“What would it have changed?” he asks. “If you’d told me.”

“I don’t know,” she whispers. “Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. But you would have been given a choice, and that’s all that matters. We— *I* took that choice away from you.”

“Because of Joe.”

She closes her eyes, breathing in and out, in and out. She wonders what Carter is doing right at this exact moment, where he’s going to spend his first full moon away from the safety of his pack.

“Yes.”

“My mother,” Ox says, and she opens her eyes to find him looking off into the forest. “She loved me.”

“She did,” Elizabeth chokes out, yet another wave of grief washing over her. Though their time together was short, Elizabeth loved Maggie, loves her still, now and forever. Part of it was the gift of Ox to the world, but only part. Maggie was so much more than just Ox, and even if she wasn’t, it would still make her worthy of veneration. By rights, Maggie could’ve let the world swallow her whole, beaten down again and again. But she’d risen above it, had turned herself into a force to be reckoned with.

And if Elizabeth hadn’t used Ox, maybe she’d still be alive.

So when she says, “Why don’t you hate me?” she almost *wants* him to. She almost *wants* Ox to blame her, to turn his anger on her. Selfish, this, again making it about what *she* wants, but then she’s still human. Mostly.

“I wanted to,” Ox says, and even though she expected it, it still surprises her. “I wanted to hate you.

Thomas too.”

“But you didn’t,” she says, hanging her head.

“No. I didn’t.”

“Why?”

He laughs again, a low sound that chases away the encroaching cold. She doesn't deserve it, doesn't deserve *him*, but she has him all the same. "You gave me purpose," he says. "You gave me direction. I was adrift, I think. Lost in the sea my father created. He had this way about him.

Sucking us in and letting us drown even as we begged for him to save us. Sometimes he did, but he was always there to throw us right back into the water."

"Are we any different?" she asks bitterly.

"I think so," Ox says, and she can hear the truth in his voice, the way his heartbeat remains steady.

Regardless of what else he thinks, he believes this, and it makes her angry. "He wasn't…he wasn't what we needed. What *I* needed."

"And we were?"

"What is this?" he asks suddenly, and it's subtle, but she feels the tug of the *Alpha* in his voice.

"What do you think you're doing here?"

"I don't know," she admits. "I can't—I keep thinking about how it could've been, if things had been different."

"Why?" he asks.

"Because I don't know how to make it stop."

He nods slowly. "I see. Can I tell you something?"

She sighs. "Always."

"Carter is going to come back."

"How do you—"

“Carter is going to come back,” he says again. “And he’s going to bring Gavin back with him, if we don’t find them first. Then we’re going to kill Robert Livingstone. I don’t know how. I don’t know when. But we’ll be together again, all of us, and nothing can stop that. Not Livingstone. Not anyone else who thinks they can hurt us. No more. You have my word. As your Alpha. As your son.”

“Ox,” she says. “*Ox*.”

He pushes himself off the tree and takes a step toward her. He fills the entire world until he’s all she can see. This boy, this strange and lonely boy who never thought he’d amount to anything because that’s what he’d been told time and time again. Oh, if only his father could see him now.

“Without you,” he says, “I don’t know where I’d be. You say you used me, and maybe you’re right.

Maybe you made mistakes over and over. Maybe you were selfish, and maybe I should hate you.”

“But you don’t,” she whispers.

“No,” he says. “I don’t. Because this life, for all that it has brought, is one I would choose again.

And again. And again.”

“*Why*?” she cries. “Why would you—”

“Because I’m your Alpha,” he says, eyes a swirling mix of red and violet. “And I am who am I am because of you. Because of my mother. Because of Thomas. And because I chose a boy who looked at me as if I was the greatest thing in his world. Don’t you see? I’m exactly where I’m supposed to be, and I will never blame you for that.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, because she can’t think of anything else to say. Ox is a gift, and one she doesn’t deserve. “For everything.”

He gathers her up in his arms. She clings to him, his face in her chest, and she cries, then, cries for all that they've done, all that they've lost. It pours out of her, and there's nothing she can do to stop it.

Eventually, she pulls away, Ox's hands cupping her face, thumbs brushing against her cheeks. "I choose you," he says. "Always."

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He leads her back to the house, the cool winter sun shining down upon them. The moon is there too, tugging, tugging, but she isn't as scared of it as she was when she woke. Ox has given her his strength once again, and she won't waste it this time. Not for anything. Her pack needs her as much as she needs them.

Kelly and Joe sit on the porch steps, heads pressed together, whispering words she can't quite make out. They stop when they see her. Kelly rises first, a determined expression on his face. He glances at Ox but it's fleeting. He only has eyes for his mother.

"Don't," he says as she opens her mouth, to say what, she doesn't know. "Just…don't." He comes to her, dark circles under his eyes, evidence of his sleepless nights. "You don't get to do this. We weren't here for it last time, but you don't get to do this again. We have work to do."

"Kelly," Joe says. "Go easy."

Kelly ignores him. "I don't know where he is. I don't know where he's gone, but we're going to find him. I don't care what it takes, but we will." He's a man on fire, and Elizabeth thinks it would be a pleasure to burn. But above all else, she believes him.

She says, "We will," her voice clear. "We'll find them both."

Her words are a promise, a lovesong she'll sing for the rest of her days.

Kelly crumples, flinging himself at her. She catches him. Joe follows a moment later, and she gathers them both up in her arms, Ox watching over them all.

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It’s not the same. There’s a gaping hole where Carter should be. They all feel it. Their howls that night under the light of a full moon are songs of sorrow and loss, but through them all, a thread of hope. It’s strong, this thread, stronger than any of them expected. And as she sings to the moon, she hopes her oldest son is doing the same, wherever he is. No matter how far away he might be, she believes that he’ll hear them. Their strength is his strength. Their love is his love. And one day—

maybe not tomorrow or the day after, but one day—she’ll look upon him again and the world will shake under the might of it. They’re the goddamn Bennett Pack, and their songs will always be heard.

She runs and runs and runs through the trees, her family at her side.

One day, all will be well.

Until then, they’ll do as they always have. They’ll fight with everything they have.

For the wolves, the ravens, the hearts and the brothers.

They will fight.

And when the fighting is done, they will live, because *that’s* what they deserve.

The wolf mother sings.

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He hears it. He thinks it’s part of the fracturing of his mind, a wish for things that aren’t and might never be again, but it goes on and on and on until he’s shaking with it. He listens. He *listens*, and in a lost and lonely wood so far from the only home he’s ever known, Carter Bennett sings back, a howl that echoes through the trees.

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In another part of the world, a wolf raises his head, a familiar song whispering like a caress.

Somewhere behind him, a great and terrible beast growls, hidden in the shadows. The wolf ignores the beast because in the back of his mind, a sliver of hope, and it’s Carter, Carter, Carter.

The wolf thinks , *stupid carter don’t carter don’t please stay away oh stay away.*

But the song goes on, only for him, and even as the beast crawls out of the shadows, Gavin Livingstone listens to the songs and for the first time in a long time, he believes.